

Camouflaged Emotions - Stoicism in the Military

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Man is the only animal that deals in that atrocity of atrocities, War. He is the only one that gathers his brethren about him and goes forth in cold blood and calm pulse to exterminate his kind. He is the only animal that for sordid wages will march out... and help to slaughter strangers of his own species who have done him no harm and with whom he has no quarrel.... And in the intervals between campaigns he washes the blood off his hands and works for the universal brotherhood of man- with his mouth.

- Mark Twain, *Welcome to the quote of garden*, 2008

Introduction

War has always been regarded as a formidable evil, wiping away large masses of people each year from the surface of the earth. Many writers have discussed the threat and terror of war, and many writings have been published with war as the main theme. Men have been fighting each other since they began to live in communities. The terror of war still continues: Kuwait, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Iraq, Somalia, etc. Though wars are fought between nations, they are carried out between the military forces that fight like faceless entities. The continuous fighting and the nature and tempo of military life have tremendous effects on the soldiers, causing radical changes in them. Many have been commented about stoicism. The words of the famous British historian and philosopher Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) provide a clear picture of stoicism when he says: “sick and yet happy, in peril and yet happy, dying and yet happy, in exile and happy, in disgrace and happy.”¹ Stoics exhibit happiness and sadness together, and it speaks of one’s schizophrenic mentality.

The camouflaged emotions always haunt stoics and they are suffocated under the forcible working conditions. They tend to be hard and rough, influenced by their difficult circumstances. Many factors play significant roles in leading soldiers to stoicism, but stoicism itself does not turn the soldiers rough and coarse. Stoicism sometimes turns out to be favorable when it is seen as endurance and loyalty in matters connected with their nation’s freedom. The military persona has always been formed within a fixed frame work, which requires controlling the emotions. A soldier feels that his emotions and passions of life have been frozen, that he is being forced to lead a mechanical life. The continual and forced

1. Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy, Book one. Ancient Philosophy*, Part III, chapter 28, 241, <<http://books.google.com/books>> (14 February 2009).

suppression of emotions gradually leads soldiers to be stoic, hardening their bodies and minds to the realities of life and leading to the breakdown of morality.

Background

The military is always ready to provide all the things that soldiers need to perform their duties. Soldiers are equipped and armored. However, concerted effort must be made to equip soldiers with a personal sense of ethics because it is a different type of equipment. Religion can play a vital role in the formation of character in a person. Military historian Sara Elise Phang rightly remarks about the religious influence on military discipline when she says that “imperial military discipline, cohesion, and obedience were reinforced by religious practices...”² Her words focus on the importance of religious faith to ethical education. An ethical education is believed to have the magical power to lead one to goodness by changing one’s morality.

Government funds training to build skill in warfare. Money should also be spent to educate soldiers on issues of personal morality. Basically, soldiers are public servants. They combat external and internal aggression, but their service is not limited to the field of warfare. Military forces are crucial in humanitarian and peace keeping missions. However, their primary function is to defend the nation from enemies. As the principal force of defense, the military must have moral principles to follow.

2. Sara Elise Phang, *Roman Military Service: Ideologies of Discipline in the Late Republic and Early Republic*, 2008, 27.

Stoicism

Stoicism is a philosophy characterized by how people react to what happens in the world-- without emotion. An age old process, it is used for controlling outward emotions. Teachings of Stoicism have played a vital role in the functioning of modern military.

The very structure of the military is built upon a hierarchical order. The soldiers who are in the low ranks are supposed to follow the orders of their senior officers. The authoritative power of senior officers allows the military to maintain strict discipline by suppressing individual desires, opinions, etc. However, an outlet to release and discard the suppressed emotions is necessary. Dr. Nancy Sherman, a distinguished educator and renowned philosopher and professor at Georgetown University, has remarked that the *training and discipline* involved in the military leads one to stoicism.

Effects

Stoicism has both advantages and disadvantages. One of the most important advantages of Stoicism is readiness to critical situations. The greatest disadvantage of Stoicism is the breakdown of morality.

Advantages

On the very first day of admission into the military, soldiers are taught control their natural passions, to give up pain and other disruptions, and are molded with one aim: the mission. They are ordered to move into harm's way, though they may not want to go there. The philosophy of stoicism assumes a guiding role in the military when it provides the

enduring capacity to the men and women of the military to undertake difficult tasks that are unthinkable for the average person. Stockdale, one of the most highly decorated officers in the history of the United States Navy, attributes a special quality to stoicism: “Stoicism is a noble philosophy that has proven to be more practicable than a modern cynic would expect.”³ From the words of Stockdale, he clearly regards stoicism positively. Stoicism enables boldness in facing difficult situations and devotion for the well-being of the country, etc. Stockdale also blames the modern man for blindly opposing stoicism, without being aware of its positive qualities. He believes that an ethically based stoicism can do much for soldiers. For example, Dr. Nancy Sherman emphasizes that uncontrollable hatred and anger leads to all kinds of crimes. Stoicism, therefore, takes a soldier away from his natural passions and holds him back from treating the war prisoners in the worst manner.

Disadvantages

In contrast, philosophers like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle believe Stoicism can also deny the soldier of this morality. Nowadays there is a tendency for Stoic soldiers to set themselves apart from the society, especially from their war prisoners. Such control may numb the soldier to atrocities. They promote torture, outrage, hatred, and sadism when they treat the war prisoners.

Researcher and philosopher of ethics Jessica Wolfendale believes “the move from soldier to torturer can occur in different ways, but the majority of military torturers are soldiers or military policemen who have been trained in elite military units.”⁴ Wolfendale is

3. VADM James B Stockdale, *Stockdale on Stoicism II: Master of My Fate*, 2008, 6.

4. Jessica Wolfendale, *Symposium: Torture and the Stoic Warrior, Stoic Warriors and Stoic Torturers: The Moral Psychology of Military Torture*, 2008, 5.

of the opinion that various reasons could be spotted out for the movement of a soldier to tortures, but she agrees that majority of the soldiers and the military policemen are trained to carry out torture not because they are abnormal or rude, but because they compartmentalize their feelings as part of their special training. Discipline, self-control, and decorum are the “required” reactions to the emotional circumstances. The Stoic philosophy requires disabled soldiers to demonstrate an “optimistic” spirit about their injuries that creates the most out of circumstances one cannot control. Controlling these basic human feelings, however, adversely affects the mind of a soldier.

Military torturers are basically hardened stoics, and most of them dehumanize their victims. This is not only part of military training but it also becomes part of the soldier himself. Without help, the Stoic, however, has difficulty humanizing himself/herself again. The inner conflict may unbalance them and create psychological problems. The following statement by Thomas A. Jarrett (Area Support Medical Company, Camp Liberty, Baghdad, Iraq) and John S. Barnett (U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, Orlando, Florida), reveal the attitudinal changes of soldiers: “Leaders’ attitudes may affect the probability of soldiers receiving help. On one hand, leaders may suspect soldiers of malingering, while on the other hand, they may feel that their soldiers are tough enough to deal with problems on their own.”⁵

What these soldiers need is training based on psychological and ethical principles, and techniques that might inspire persons to express their sensations and emotions. They could be provided time for relaxation, such as watching films, engaging in different games and arts, etc., to make them mentally fit.

The proponents of stoic principles argue that soldiers must deal with imprisonment, the act of killing people, and the process of grieving for the loss of a dear one, etc., and that

⁵ Thomas A Jarrett, John S Barnett, *Treating stress related disorders. Warrior Resilience Training* <<http://www.usuhs.edu/ussw/2007/JarrettMS.doc>> (31 January 2009), 5

this exposure will enable the cultivation of tenderness in them, assuming they will react to these situations with reason and logic.

Conclusion

Stoicism in the military is deep rooted. The very strict rules and discipline of the military mould them as stubborn, bold figures who are ready to face any critical situation. These strict military rules have made them barren and have contributed to their rough behavior to war prisoners, and lapses in good manners and humanitarian considerations. Stoics camouflage their emotions, and gradually gain mastery over their natural passions and emotions. The military provides them everything, and they are satisfied with it. Hierarchical order contributes to stoicism as well. However, stoicism in military should be supplemented with lessons of ethics/ morality. Therefore, the military should increase and implement mandatory ethical training to avoid potentially grave consequences caused by the breakdown of morality.

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